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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0394
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3474
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1292
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1159
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1728
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1406
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0751
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2292
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
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UNCLAS ASHGABAT 000312

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ACTIVIST'S LETTER TO
BERDIMUHAMEDOV ON BEHALF OF VULNERABLE CITIZENS SO FAR
ATTRACTS NO NEGATIVE RESPONSE FROM THE GOVERNMENT

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Civil society activist Natalya Shabunts published via Internet a long letter she sent to Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov, criticizing the government for its failure to protect and care for Turkmenistan's most vulnerable citizens, including the disabled and senior citizens. The letter represents the collective complaints of numerous citizens. She said she believes that if the president were made aware of these problems, he might consider corrective action, given his desire for Turkmenistan to fulfill its international human rights obligations. At the same time, she indicated full awareness of the risk she is taking in doing so. Even though her letter of complaint has appeared internationally and she informed people beforehand of her intention to publicize her complaints, there so far has been no negative government response, including from the security organs. This level of freedom of expression would have been unheard of 1 1/2 years ago, and represents another small step forward. END SUMMARY.

3. (SBU) Post called on March 4 on Natalya Anurova-Shabunts, the author of an open letter to President Berdimuhamedov that was made public on March 3. Shabunts is a well-educated, long-time civil society activist in Ashgabat whose work in recent times has primarily centered on services and educational programs for the country's most disadvantaged citizens. She has a long history of work in the civil society network here, having authored several legal compendia for OSCE, and overseen or participated in numerous USAID and other internationally funded projects. (NOTE: She forwarded a copy of her letter to post and other international organization offices here in mid-February in the hope that doing so would afford her some protection from a negative government response. END NOTE.)

4. (U) The letter, which can now be read in its entirety on the [chrono-tm.org](#) website, is a respectful yet detailed

criticism of the progress of reforms underway in Turkmenistan, that specifically focuses on the plight of disabled citizens, as well as pensioners and the Russian-speaking minority. Here, the combination of archaic cultural biases, the government's refusal to acknowledge the needs of disabled citizens, and lack of equipment and technology to assist the disabled has conspired to keep them at home or in hospital-style care centers, where they are out of view. Her letter describes the dramatically declining living conditions for pensioners, and also mourns the poor treatment and continuing emigration of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia, who were rejected by the previous government and continue to be ignored by the current one.

15. (SBU) Shabunts expressed her frustration with both local and national government officials, who have repeatedly impeded her and her colleagues' efforts to improve the lives of the disabled citizens that her programs assist. She noted that they have limited capacity to help themselves, and only receive welfare benefits of about 11-20 dollars a month. She said that government representatives refused to permit projects that provided any kind of educational training, even though there are no national educational programs for students with special needs beyond elementary school. Further, she accused city officials of constantly throwing up obstacles to her group's efforts to establish a new location for their program and generally to do their work.

16. (SBU) She said she sent the letter to the presidential apparatus with the stated promise that if she received no indication that President Berdimuhamedov had received it within a certain time, she would make the letter public. Shabunts described herself as an optimist, and suggested that

if the president were personally aware of the transgressions of various government officials, this behavior toward her work would stop, especially given the president's declared goal of fulfilling the country's international human rights standards. (COMMENT: We would doubt he was ever shown the letter. END COMMENT.)

17. (SBU) Shabunts displayed her realist side as well, and spoke critically of the general reform efforts to this point. She described Turkmen government officials as "masters of good documentation" in that they can be very efficient at developing new legislation, at assembling reports for international consumption, and producing good news articles praising the progress of these efforts. She said that she is still waiting to feel or observe the actual, tangible effects of reforms that are underway. Interestingly, she holds a Russian passport, and could leave Turkmenistan if she wished, but she said that her work here is important and meaningful, and this country is her home. (NOTE: According to Internet information, Shabunts was denied permission to travel abroad in 2005. She worked closely with the Soros Foundation in the past, likely a factor in the denial. END NOTE.)

18. (SBU) She admitted that she is concerned about the government's reaction to her letter appearing on the Internet. Although the letter has been posted on the Internet since March 3, she said she has not received any calls or visits from the authorities about it.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Shabunts is a product of long-term U.S. and international organization efforts to develop civil society and public interest activism here. The fact that there has been no negative reaction from the government, despite her having sent the letter to embassies and international organizations, to the president, and its posting on the Internet is interesting. Under former President Niyazov, anyone who dared to do such a thing would probably have been placed under house arrest or imprisoned. It is possible that the government differentiates Shabunts' largely apolitical focus on socio-economic problems for Turkmenistan's most vulnerable citizens from someone with a more political agenda. We doubt the president has seen the letter, and it could be the security organs have not yet

gotten around to her. If she remains free from harassment,
that will be another small step forward for Turkmenistan.
END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND